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# Newsletter: The Center for Professional Ethics, Fall 1987

Case Western Reserve University

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# The Center for Professional Ethics

# NEWSLETTER

at Case Western Reserve University

## CPE RECEIVES ENDOWMENT

On June 4, 1987, the Board of Trustees of Case Western Reserve University approved a Resolution establishing the David and Katherine Ragone Endowment Fund. In the words of the resolution, "The income from this Fund shall be used to support educational and scholarly activities related to the study and practice of professional ethics, especially those activities organized by the Center for Professional Ethics..." Naturally we are proud and excited about this grant of over \$110,000. This generous gift from our retiring president and Mrs. Ragone will be the basis for additional fund-raising activities soon to be launched. The Center has always lived a hand-to-mouth existence, using whatever monies generated from individual or foundation grants to provide operating expenses. Now we are anticipating another financial dimension to keep the Center's important work going: a substantial endowment.

On behalf of the Center and through the Office of Student Affairs, President Ragone was presented a certificate of gratitude for establishing the Fund. On that occasion he echoed what he had written to us announcing the gift: "There is a great deal to be done in professional ethics and certainly it is one of the areas of inquiry that could provide a strong unifying force within Case Western Reserve University. It is my hope that the Center will develop into a strong intellectual and moral force in the wider world." Thank you, David and Kit Ragone. We will make your legacy our pledge to fulfill those stated aspirations.

## ETHICS, CHARACTER AND THE PROFESSIONS

by Robert P. Lawry, Co-Director, Center for Professional Ethics

What is ethics? A branch of philosophy, dealing with fundamental issues of right and wrong, good and evil, value, judgement, virtue. What is morality? The behavior of human beings regarding fundamental matters of right, wrong, good, evil, value, judgement, virtue. Thus, these two words that slide so glibly off the tongue together are about truth and conduct. The questing, questioning and reflecting, is done not only to know, but to do, to act. In the Aristotteleian tradition ethics and morality is not simply about a part of human life but is about the whole of it. It is about "human flourishing," i.e. how I should behave and how I should think about my behavior if I am to lead the "good life," the full, rich, best human life possible. This tradition is largely lost to us today. Ethics and morality seem to be "things apart," separate spheres which have a limited role to play in our lives. Thus, the foreign policy makers often juxtapose national security and morality, as some economists juxtapose efficiency and morality. Excuses for not doing the



right thing are often "but I need to make a buck," or "I need to get ahead" (or "get elected") or simply "I want," "I need," "I deserve."

Understood properly the only valid excuse for not doing the right thing is: I did not know it was the right thing to do. Life is complex; moral issues are often damnably difficult to sort out. If, however, we knew what the right thing to do was and simply did not do it, the best we could say would be: "I'm sorry. I was not strong enough. I lacked moral courage." Since we all are human, we all, at least sometimes, lack moral courage. Nevertheless, there is a clear and important difference between lack of knowledge and weakness.

These preliminary matters are terribly important to get straight. They are not, however, the focus of the activities of the Center for Professional Ethics. The Center's primary task is to focus on ethics in a professional setting, always aware that Professional Ethics is only a sub-category of ethics and must be understood and dealt with in a manner that is consonant with ethics generally. Our object is to promote morally good behavior and solid ethical thinking for human beings who also happen to be professionals.

As I write this the Contragate hearings proceed apace. Oliver North has just finished testifying. John Poindexter is presently under the glare of the television cameras. Whatever one thinks of the politics of the matter or of the larger public policy debates about the sale of arms to Iran or the diversion of funds from those sales to the contras in Nicaragua, one has to be struck by the lack of clear thinking about the ethics of these matters and of the methods adopted to achieve the goals of the government officials involved.

Without demanding philosophically sophisticated responses from government officials, could we not expect some reasonable effort to justify wholesale lying, or to come to terms with the question of the moral obligation to obey the law? I condemn no one. I simply suggest the ethical and moral climate is barren of anything resembling serious thinking about these matters.

The ethics problem, of course, is a complicated one because it is so socially and culturally pervasive. Surely, however, one of the places where we need to search for a solution is within the University. It is here that most professionals are trained. That training adds and emphasizes values that the student must try to incorporate into the deeper dimensions of all s/he is or aspires to be. The task is doubly difficult in the modern world. Most students come from an ethically thin background. Churches and family units used to provide strong moral teachings (even if sometimes misguided or distorted teachings). They no longer do. The larger culture is mostly confused, but, borrowing from the dominant ideologies of the day, whether clearheaded or not, most of us adopt the adage "to be selfish is to be good." Aristotle's idea of "human flourishing"



**The  
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for  
Professional  
Ethics** at Case Western Reserve University

**MONDAY EVENING DIALOGUE FORUMS**

The forum program is held from 7:30 to 9:00 p.m. in the 1914 Lounge of The Thwing Student Center. Four of the Forums are planned to include a speaker followed by group discussion. Two of the evenings are deliberately unplanned so that "issues of the moment" can be featured. The program is as follows:

**September 14th**

**"The Japanese Ethical Experience: Principle and Practice"**  
Lee Makela, Associate Professor of History  
Cleveland State University

**September 28th**

**"Insider Trading: An Ethics Trap?"**

A debate between:

Mark Moran, Assistant Professor of Management  
Case Western Reserve University

and

John Boatright, Professor of Philosophy  
John Carroll University

**October 12th**

A program on a timely current event.

**October 26th**

**"Can a good person be a Criminal Lawyer?"**  
Kevin McMunigal, Assistant Professor of Law  
Case Western Reserve University

**November, 9th**

**"The Ethics of Individualism: A Constitutional Perspective"**  
Ted Mearns, Professor of Law  
Case Western Reserve University

**November 23rd**

A program on a timely current event.



### CONFERENCES

Besides the six Monday Evening Dialogue Forums scheduled for the fall semester, 1987, the Center is involved as co-sponsor of two larger conferences to be held during that same time frame. A business ethics conference tentatively entitled "Ethical Practices in American Industry" will be presented on Thursday, October 14, from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. at the Ernst & Whinney Education Center in Cleveland. In addition to the CPE and Ernst & Whinney, sponsoring groups include: The Ethics Resource Center of Washington, D.C., Cuyahoga Community College and the Lincoln Electric Company.

In late October or early November, the CPE will join The Society of Professional Journalists, Sigma Delta Chi, in hosting a conference on Politics and the Press. This conference will deal with the type of questions raised in the Gary Hart expose. What ethical limits should the press respect in dealing with public figures? Stay tuned.

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### "SYSTEMS OF ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING"

This seminar will be held on Saturday morning, September 26, 1987, from 9:00 to 11:30 a.m. in the Library of the Church of the Covenant, 11205 Euclid Avenue. The Seminar begins with a description of the centrality of one's moral foundation as the ground on which ethical decisions are made. The nature of "duty" and "ends" ethics are then described, after which several case studies are explored by the Seminar members. Insofar as possible, cases will be drawn from the interests of those present. This short-course on ethical decision-making has proved helpful in providing a basis for clearer decision-making in the more difficult ethical situations faced today by so many professionals.

### SIX-WEEK STUDY GROUP ON ETHICS

If enough people are interested, an informal six-week study group will be held using the book, Ethics: Theory and Practice, by Jacques P. Thiroux. The group will meet once a week and will deal with the particular interests of the members on an informal and conversational basis. Ethics: Theory and Practice will be used more as a resource than a text. If you are interested in such a group, please call the Center Office at 368-5349 by September 16th.



is not to be equated with Ayn Rand's "The Virtue of Selfishness." Selfishness is not a virtue, although care for the integrity of the self most assuredly is. In the movie version of Robert Bolt's extraordinary play, A Man For All Seasons, Thomas More shows his friend Norfolk why he cannot give his true opinion of the Act of Succession (for he would lose his head) and why he will not lie about his opinion. More cups his hand's together and tells Norfolk that he is like water in those cupped hands. If he loosens his fingers by lying, his very self would slip through and be splattered into the dirt. That is integrity not selfishness, though some careless people might equate the two.

We at the Center recognize at least three sources of ethical values which need to be integrated into the moral self. One might be called the "personal" because we are each a product of specific families and traditions, religious and ethnic or racial, which come first to us at a relatively early age. The second is broadly "cultural," and overlaps with the first. My meaning here is the dominant ideals and values of the day, some historically rooted in larger traditions and others more or less widely shared social values. The third comes last but is very powerful, despite the fact that it enters the life stage process rather late. It is, of course, "professional ethics," which actually does change or harden some students into a particular view of behavior that allows them full comfort when asked: Who are you? The answer is too readily: doctor, lawyer, accountant, engineer, nurse. No, we are particularized human beings always, and our professional identities are only one of the shadows we give off when stricken by the light of the sun.

It is crucial to understand that being a particular professional does change what we are and what we do. It does change acceptable moral justifications for certain kinds of behavior, even behaviors that, at first blush, seem permanently etched in the moral landscape. But it does not change all of our behaviors, nor even a great many of them -- or it ought not to. It is never good enough to say, "I am a lawyer, therefore..." or "I am a soldier, therefore..." There must be an understanding of why that professional label changes a lie from a morally blameworthy act to one which is justifiably excused. The job of fitting the professional, the cultural and the personal together is not an easy one. It demands character and effort.

One last point. Much the hardest part of the task is to convince the wayward self that the undertaking is necessary to a fully human life. Therefore, the ideas I sketched at the start of this article - or something like them - are the ones that need acceptance before we can get on with the task at hand. However, until we begin to struggle with the questions of thought and action about good and bad, right and wrong, value, judgment, virtue, we may not be willing to accept the difficult but rewarding task of trying to understand what we should do and why. "The unexamined life is not worth living," runs the ancient adage. This is, in part, the task of the University. In a special way, it is the task of Center for Professional Ethics.



**The Center  
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at Case Western Reserve University

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